



She was at the window again that night, leaning over her desk, studying a book in the light from her green shade lamp. Her room was on the second floor of the house, a renovated anti-bellum structure that joined the line of houses on the Esplanade, overlooking the Missouri river. Rich people lived in those houses, officers from Fort Leavenworth, or maybe professionals from Kansas City who didn't mind the commute. She was certainly pretty enough to be an important man's daughter, Chad thought as he stood on the sidewalk and shamelessly looked up at her window. He wasn't peeping, or invading her privacy, or anything sinister, he was just out walking his dog and there she was, a vision of natural beauty, like a sunset or a harvest moon. He couldn't help but stare at her while Santana, his Shepard mix dog, studied the fire hydrant conveniently located across from her house.

She was wearing a sweater because it was a little chilly, but she had the window open anyway. It was a perfect night for open windows. The crisp October breeze blowing off the river was amazing; it filled the lungs and cleared the head. Chad stood on the street and breathed deep as he watched the wind move her hair; soft brown bangs brushed against her high forehead. She frowned and her brown wrinkled, then she started flipping back through the pages of the book. Chad turned away, looked out at the river, then started walking again, pulling his dog behind him. He wondered if she'd noticed him when he started moving, if she was watching him now as he tugged at his dog's leash. He stopped slouching and raised his head, just in case, but by the time he'd reached the end of the block, his hands were back into the pockets of his sweatshirt and his head hung low.

An important person's daughter. A beautiful girl....

She might as well be the harvest moon for as close as Chad would ever come to her.

David watched the stupid boy dragging his stupid dog down the street. Goddamn dog stopped at every single street sign, every single lamp post, every single anything that could be pissed on, and the boy had to constantly tug the leash to get the mutt to keep walking. David noticed, however, that the boy didn't tug the dog away from the fire hydrant in front of Amy's house. Oh no, the dog was allowed to sniff that landmark up one side and down the other while the boy craned his neck and got a good peek at David's girl.

His girl!

He was the one who had noticed her sitting on the bench as he cruised the Esplanade in his Chrysler model K. He was the one who had circled around to make sure she was as young and pretty as his first impression led him to believe. Then he was the one who had parked on a side street, walked all the way to the river with his heart pounding in his chest, sat on another bench about 50 yards down from where she sat, and waited to follow her home.

She had been busy with a book, so she hadn't noticed David sitting on the bench next to hers which made it easy for him to spend a lot of time gawking at her. Jesus, but she was pretty! Soft brown hair braided and draped over her shoulder, the tip of the braid coming to rest on the swell of her breast which was round and full under the cream colored knit sweater she'd been wearing. When she flipped a page, her lips moved as she read the first few lines, then stayed slightly parted until she needed to flip again. David rested his hands on his lap and pressed down, trying to stop his growing erection. It didn't work and he had to tear his eyes away and look at the river to calm down.

She was so young.... Dare he think it? Dare he believe it? A beautiful virgin?

It was getting too dark to read so she closed the book and leaned against the bench, hanging her elbows over the top plank. This caused her chest to stick out and David once again had to turn away, his acne scarred face flushing red.

She watched the sunset behind the trees on the far side of the river. Soon the water was dark, the sound of it rushing west to meet the Mississippi being the only noise in the otherwise peaceful dusk. In the diminished light, her cream sweater took on an unusual glow, like the first star visible in the night sky.

She arched her back and stretched as she stood up, twisting her torso left and right. Stuck to his bench, David watched the luminous sweater shift around the curves of her body with his jaw slightly agape. Oh, she was going to be his girl, no question about it.

He followed her home, careful to remain as inconspicuous as possible, and when she entered the elegant two-story house on the Esplanade, David just kept walking, making a point of looking the other way as he passed. He'd had enough for one night; he would start the real reconnaissance tomorrow.

Her name was Amy, she lived with her father, John Rodgers, who was a prison guard at the State Penitentiary in Lansing. The mother, Pam Rodgers, had died in some kind of work-related accident two years and John had bought the nice house with the insurance payoff. John drank too much, and Amy had a thing for Russian literature. Her room was on the second floor facing the street. She didn't keep a diary,

or if she did, she stored it in on the computer which David didn't know how to operate. She favored plain white panties and plain white bras. Her dirty clothes went in the laundry chute and wound up in the basement.

David had discovered all these facts and more when he broke into the Rodgers' house one day while the father was at work and the daughter at school. Well, he didn't really break in as the side door leading into the garage was unlocked. The father kept a secret stash of booze in the garage and was careless about locking up. So, David, disguised as a repairman with overalls and a toolbox, casually entered the house in the middle of the day and helped himself to Amy's secret life. The poor thing, losing a mother at such an early age, with a drunk for a father.... Oh, what the right man could do for a sad child like Amy!

David had spent an hour snooping then left the house with a pair of unwashed panties he'd taken from the pile in the basement.

He had the panties with him now, balled up in the pocket of his black sweatshirt. He rubbed the fabric between his fingers like a talisman as he watched her from afar. She was his girl, all right. She just didn't know it yet.

That's why it was very irritating to have the stupid boy looking at her through the window every night. The boy hadn't planned it, he hadn't done any research; he just shuffled down the wrong street one day, walking his stupid dog, and got a good long look at what David had worked so hard for: the fantasy of Amy sitting at her window. Now the boy walked by her house every night, lingering too long with his dog at the fire hydrant. David, who was hiding in the foliage of the riverbed, felt violated by the intrusion.

She was David's little virgin girl, and the stupid boy was ruining that fantasy with his shaggy dog and horny eyes.

David waited until the boy had walked past the furthest streetlight and disappeared in the darkness before turning his attention back to Amy's house. She was leaning out the window now, also watching the stupid boy and his stupid dog. After the boy had gone, her shoulders sagged, and she looked at the moon for a moment before closing the window and drawing the shade.

David's mouth went dry, and he shook with anger. He had to put a stop to this!

It was another perfect night, cool and crisp with a half-moon floating in the sky, and Chad was more than happy to take Santana for his nightly walk. The

excitable dog jumped all over him when he came out the back door, making it difficult to hook the leash to the collar, but he managed, and they were on their way. Santana scrambled to get to the first streetlight, choking himself on the collar with a painful wheezing sound. Chad walked a bit faster to accommodate the dog and soon they were stopped at the streetlight on the corner, Santana's back leg lifted high.

When Santana finished his business, Chad turned right and headed towards the river. It was the long route, taking at least an hour to complete the circle that ran from his neighborhood of rundown single-story shacks through the wealthy mansions on Esplanade then back down 5th street, but he wasn't in a hurry. In fact, he was glad to be out of the house as his parents were fighting again. It was about money, of course, and how his father wasn't responsible enough to hold on to it.

Last summer Chad worked at the hardware store in the mall. He tried to keep that job during the school year, but his mom said no when his grades started slipping. Yet here he was, wasting the evening walking his dog while homework sat undone on his desk. At least with a job he could make some money so Mom wouldn't have to worry as much and he wouldn't have to leave the house to get away from her nagging.

Besides, if he was going to go to college, it wouldn't be for grades, it would be for art. He had dozens of oversized notebooks filled with charcoal sketches and colored pencil drawings which were as good as any work he'd seen in the graphic novels he read. He liked drawing action heroes and busty, half naked women with guns, but he was good at scenery too. His sketch of a catfish on the riverbed won second place at the State competition, and his design for the new Parks and Recreation logo won honorable mention. The way Chad figured it, he could either get a scholarship for his art, or he could just work until he made enough money to start his own comic book. Either way, he didn't need all that Math and English nonsense. It was nothing but a waste of time.

Lost in thought, Chad almost forgot about the girl in the window. Her house was coming up and he straightened his posture, giving the leash a tug to pull Santana away from another streetlight. He wanted the dog to have enough left to make a good show at the fire hydrant, give Chad some time to look at the girl if she was there again tonight. Such a pretty girl, Chad fantasized about striking up a conversation with her, maybe telling her he was an artist and that he'd love to draw her someday. Maybe even half naked. Holding a gun.... Or maybe not.

Santana never made it to the fire hydrant. He started sniffing the ground about ten feet from the landmark then pulled Chad off the sidewalk to the edge of the shrubby where he snatched something in his mouth. Chad bent down to take a look, but Santana growled, low and menacing. Chad scolded the dog and grabbed his chin

to get a look at what it was he'd found that was so interesting. It was an entire rack of ribs, almost too large to fit in Santana's needle nose mouth. Slobber dripped from the edges of the meat and Chad didn't want to touch it, but he figured it was probably soiled and not good to eat so he tried to pry it loose from his dog's mouth.

Santana growled aggressively and jerked his head around when Chad touched the piece of ribs that was showing.

"Okay," Chad told the dog, wiping his hands on his jeans, "but don't blame me if you get sick."

Chad turned around and took Santana straight home. The dog had lost all interest in walking anyway.

Chad found Santana the next morning, laying in a pool of bloody vomit, dead.

The problem with prison guards is they tend to work odd shifts. For example, during his first week of stalking, David hadn't seen Amy's father once. He wasn't there in the morning when David watched Amy's silhouette behind the window shade getting ready for school (she put her bra on first, then the deodorant, which David found fascinating) and he was never there at night when David watched Amy do homework by the light of her green shade lamp. He felt sorry for her, being alone so much, but he had plans to fix that problem soon enough.

Then the next week John Rodgers was home all the time, waving to Amy from the front door when her ride picked her up for school in the morning, and coming home at night in time to cook a warm dinner for his daughter before she finished with her after school activities. Some nights Daddy would go out again, presumably to a bar, but it wasn't consistent enough to establish a pattern. David sat in his hiding place, wrapped in a black blanket with a thermos of hot coffee between his legs, and considered his options. He'd missed his chance that first week, it would have been so easy to sneak in the side door again and wait for her to come home. Then it would have been just the two of them alone in that great big house, with all the time in the world.

Now he had to think of something else or wait until John Rodgers started working second or third shifts again. But who knew when that would be? And it was

already getting uncomfortably cold at night. David didn't want to find himself freezing his ass off in these goddamn shrubs come November.

At least he hadn't seen the stupid boy in a few days. Stupid boy and his stupid dog, eat any old shit he found lying on the ground. If only the problem of getting Amy alone could be solved that easily.

Santana's death hit everybody in the Redding house hard, even Chad's father who refused to cry openly, but spent a very long time in the detached garage cleaning up after he had buried the dog. There was some discussion about calling the police, or putting up fliers with a reward for information, but in the end, they just let it go. Even if the meat had been deliberately poisoned, it obviously hadn't been meant for Santana as nobody could have known he would be walking there that night. The dog happened upon it by accident. It was just bad luck.

The question then became one of whether they should immediately replace Santana. Chad's mom said no, they should give themselves time to complete the grieving process. The argument being that if they bought another dog, it would just postpone the painful emotion of having lost a loved one, making it even harder to cope when the next dog died. Dad then suggested that when the next dog died, they rush out and buy another one quick, thus postponing the grief for another ten years, and so on. He reckoned that as long as dogs kept fucking in the streets, there would always be enough puppies for them to avoid dealing with that painful emotion.

Mom told him to watch his mouth, then asked if he would be so eager to replace her if, God forbid, anything should happen. Dad apologized and assured her he could never love another woman after her. Besides, he said, he couldn't remember the last time he saw her parents fucking in the street.

The very next day Chad came home from school and found his father in the back yard playing with a brand new, jet-black Rottweiler puppy.

"Isn't he great?" Dad asked, when the puppy trotted over to greet Chad.

Chad took a step back.

"Dad," he said, "That's a Rottweiler."

"Right," Dad agreed, "I've named him Stevie Ray."

"Rottweilers kill people, Dad."

“Nah, only people who deserve it. They are gentle as lambs to good people.” Dad whistled and knelt, Stevie Ray turned and waddled over to lick his face, “See? He won’t hurt you. Come here and pet him.”

Chad approached the young dog slowly. He remembered hearing somewhere that you should never try to pat a dog on the top of its head as that could be taken as a sign of aggression, so he reached under the dog’s chin and stroked its massive chest. The dog started panting and looked at Chad with warm brown eyes.

“It’s big for a puppy,” Chad remarked.

“He’ll be a big dog,” Dad replied with undeserved pride, “His dad is a champion show Rottweiler, wins all sorts of awards around Kansas City. You buy a dog like this, it’ll cost you thousands. I’m not kidding. Thousands.”

“How did you get him?”

“I work with the brother of the guy who breeds them. When I told him what happened to Santana, he arranged it so we could get this dog for free. They are dog lovers too, and they hate to hear about stuff like what happened to Santana. And the guy who breeds them, he’s been having trouble selling them lately because of all the bad press, like you said, people think these dogs are killers.”

“Yeah, well, they are killer’s dad. Just last week, remember? The boy in Westin?”

“Ah, bullshit,” Dad tugged the dog’s ears and Stevie Ray shook his head playfully, “the only way these dogs are killers is when they aren’t trained well, abused, or if they are inbred. Stevie Ray here is 100% pure bred, so all we have to do is bring him up right.”

Chad bit his lower lip. They had never even completely trained Santana not to shit in the house. And now they were going to have to train a dog not to kill?

“Mom’s not going to like it.”

“At first,” Dad said stoically, “but just look at his eyes? How could you not fall in love with those puppy eyes?”

Chad and Stevie Ray looked at each other. There was something undeniably compelling about the dog’s eyes, they had an alertness to them, a certain spark. Chad couldn’t say he immediately fell in love with them, but he did feel an unusual respect for the dog. There was intelligence in Stevie Ray’s eyes, like the dog

was determining Chad's place in the ranking order of the pack. By the look in the dog's eyes, Chad could tell he wasn't a lock for third place.

Chad's dad was working the graveyard shift the first week of Stevie Ray's induction into the Redding family, so he was able to join his son for the ritual evening walks. Dad had talked to the breeder and was full of information on how to train Rottweilers, all of which he shared with Chad while they paraded Stevie Ray around the neighborhood.

Apparently training a Rottweiler was as easy as programming a computer to calculate pi to infinity. There were hundreds of rules and rituals which needed to be obeyed if Stevie Ray was to become a trusted family companion and not a blood thirsty killer. Some of them made sense ("never hit him with your bare hand") and others were just confusing ("one day this week, when you come home from school, take a nap in his dog bed... no, I'm not kidding... that's how you let him know that he is below you in the pack.") And by the end of the week, Chad was totally overwhelmed by the dog but felt closer to his dad than he had in a long time. So, even though he knew it was a bad sign when he found Stevie Ray napping in *his* bed when he came home from school, he grew to love the dog if for no other reason than he'd given him and his dad something to do together.

After his week of graveyard was up, Dad had to work second shift which meant Chad would be responsible for walking the dog by himself for a while. The father and son sat at the breakfast table and went over the rules one more time while Mom stood at the electric range and rolled her eyes. Stevie Ray lay silently on the kitchen floor, head resting between his paws, arching an expressive eyebrow whenever he heard his name.

"And you don't want him pulling on the lease, but don't let him dictate the speed of the walk either."

"Okay, dad."

"If you want, try to get him to walk behind you, you know, like we taught him to heel the other night."

"I don't know...."

"Only if you think he's ready. Otherwise, just make sure he doesn't stop at every streetlamp. We're walking him for exercise, not so he can piss on everything west of the Missouri."

“So, I should tug on the leash?”

“Right. Don’t be afraid to give it a good yank. Stevie Ray is tough; he can take it.”

“You think I can walk him a different path? Or should I stick to the neighborhood?”

“Good question. I’m not sure.... He might get confused or overly excited, with the new smells and all.... But he’s a smart dog, he should be able to handle it. Just don’t let him stop at every streetlamp.”

“Okay.”

“Hey, you’re not thinking of walking him down Esplanade? Where Santana found the ribs?”

“Well, I was....”

Dad looked thoughtful for a moment, then said, “I’d rather you didn’t. No without me. Just in case.”

“Okay,” Chad said, and they both turned to look at Stevie Ray. The dog raised an eyebrow and snorted through his big black nose.

From his hiding place in the bushes, David watched Amy’s father leave for work. The big, slump-shouldered man stood at the car for a moment, staring at his shoes, then opened the door and threw himself behind the wheel, the car tilting noticeably to the left. The interior light went on and David could see John Rodgers reach over to the glove box, take out a flask, bring it to his mouth and toss his head back. He wiped his mouth with his forearm and shuddered, then returned the flask back to the glove box and put the car in reverse.

It was 7:55 at night on a Wednesday. This was the third night in a row he’d left at around this time. David focused his binoculars on Amy’s window and saw her looking down the street after her father’s car. Through the magnification of the binoculars, David could tell she was very sad, no doubt concerned about her father’s alcoholism.

David felt an overwhelming surge of emotion for his poor, sad little girl.

He was tempted to walk right up to her front door and knock, then explain himself to her when she opened the door. How he knew everything about her, how he had been following her and watching her, and how he understood her more than anybody else. If she would just give him the chance, he could make love to her that was so sweet and gentle, she would forget about all her problems, if only for one evening.

Then he could peel off the ugly latex mask he was wearing, revealing his true, Tom Cruise handsome face, and serenade her like Barry White while he carried her up the stairs with arms that were much stronger than the two shapeless, plastic-man appendages he really had.

No, the better plan was to come back tomorrow night with all the right equipment and wait until the father left for work. Then he could sneak in the side door, show her the knife to let her know he was serious, make her swallow a few flunitrazepam pills, and spend a nice, relaxed evening alone with his special girl.

David took the binoculars away from his face and grabbed the thermos, enjoying the feeling of warmth in his hands. He would finish the coffee then leave no point in waiting for her to turn out the lights tonight. Tomorrow he would be able to use his hands to see her in the dark, every soft, young inch of her....

Chad had to admit, walking Stevie Ray was a lot more dignified than walking Santana. Dragging Santana up and down the streets of Leavenworth had been a chore, and not a very pleasant one either as that dog had to constantly lift his leg against anything that wouldn't roll away. Stevie Ray, on the other hand, took care of business early then spent the rest of the walk striding purposely ahead of Chad, scanning the scenery with his head held high, ready for anything. And the guys who stood around fixing cars and drinking beer at night, they used to blow kisses when Chad walked Santana in front of their driveways, but they kept their mouths shut when Stevie Ray passed by. They just nodded their heads in admiration.

Santana had been a fine dog, and Chad missed him and all that, but Stevie Ray.... Stevie Ray was a bad-ass motherfucker dog.

Chad grabbed the leash as he passed his father who was in the kitchen getting ready for work.

"Taking Stevie Ray for his walk?" Dad asked, "A little early, don't you think?"

“It’s a nice night,” Chad replied, “I’ll take him around the neighborhood twice.”

“Next week I’m back on day shift. We’ll take him down Esplanade. Maybe get him in the truck and take him to the VA park. See how he does without the leash.”

“Sounds good,” Chad said, the screen door slamming behind him as he jumped down the steps to the back yard. Stevie Ray was waiting there, his little stub of a tail wagging ferociously. Chad hooked the leash to the dog’s collar and off they went. Stevie Ray stopped at the first streetlight and did his business, drenching the post with a day’s worth of saved urine, then turned left like they always did. Chad yanked him back and started walking the opposite direction, headed towards the river. It was such a nice night, and he was bored of the same old path. He wanted to smell the river and walk on the Esplanade. Besides, what were the odds of there being another hunk of poisoned meat on the sidewalk?

And Chad was wondering, if that pretty girl should happen to be sitting at her open window again, what would she think of his new dog?

It was past 7:55 and John Rodgers’ car was still parked in the driveway. Had he called in sick? Was he too drunk to go to work? David watched the house from his hiding place in the undergrowth of the riverbank and started shaking to release pent up energy. His stomach flipped and he felt nauseous. If the father didn’t leave for work tonight, would David ever be able to trust his schedule again? Would he ever get to be alone with Amy in that nice roomy house? What other choice did he have? Drive up alongside her when she was walking home, “hey little girl, would you like some candy?”

No. She wasn’t stupid, and David wasn’t strong enough for anything bold. It had to be in the house. And it had to be tonight! David felt the bile rise in his throat and his eyes started tearing. He couldn’t stand the thought of losing her, after he’d done so much preparation.

When the big man finally staggered out the front door, tucking his prison guard uniform into his pants, David let out a slight cry of relief. He picked up the black gym bag he’d packed special for tonight and clutched it against his chest. It wouldn’t be long now.

Chad kept a brisk pace behind Stevie Ray and found his breath a little heavier than usual. With Santana, he never got the chance to work his heart rate up because of the constant stopping and starting, but Stevie Ray didn't let much distract him from the joy of exercise. The dog kept his head up and paws moving, like a pony or a mini bear, lumbering down the sidewalk. As they approached the house where the pretty girl lived, Chad realized the drawback of having such an obedient dog. Stevie Ray would trot right past the fire hydrant, not allowing Chad any time to sneak a glance at the window. He made a quick decision to force the dog to stop by pretending to tie his shoe in front of her house. He came all this way; it would be a shame if he didn't even try to see if she was still sitting like a goddess behind the window.

Two things happened as Chad drew alongside the pretty girl's house. One; he saw a man he assumed to be the girl's father walking to the car in the driveway. Chad noticed the man wore the same uniform his father did, which meant they worked together in the prison, which made Chad reevaluate his assessment that they had to be fabulously wealthy to live in that house. The second thing was Stevie Ray started growling, a low, menacing sound that sent a chill down Chad's back. His first instinct was to drop the leash and run, but when he saw Stevie Ray's head pointed at the shrubs lining the riverbed, he figured the dog was simply menacing a possum or raccoon or something.

"Relax, boy," Chad sighed with relief, "come on."

Chad looked at the house again and waved to the man who was standing at the end of the driveway now, watching them. The man waved back, curious as to what the dog was making a fuss about. Chad took the opportunity to look up and saw the pretty girl watching them from the window. She was absolutely fantastic; with a flawless heart-shaped face framed by the softest brown hair he'd ever seen. Their eyes met briefly, and Chad's jaw dropped. He wanted to say something, or at least wave, but before he could raise his arm Stevie Ray lunged, jerking Chad to the ground and breaking his hold on the leash.

Stevie Ray flew into the shrubs and a man started screaming. The girl's father ran across the street as Chad scrambled to his feet, shouting after his dog. The father put a hand on Chad's shoulder to stop him from following Stevie Ray into the bushes.

The commotion coming from the darkness of the foliage was terrifying. The man kept crying out in pain and Stevie Ray sounded like an entire army of feral dogs, growling and barking with a terrifying fury.

Eventually the man and dog stumbled out of the underbrush, the man crawling on his hands and knees, trying to protect his head from Stevie Ray's wildly snapping jaws. The dog was jumping all over his back and the man begged them to call him off.

“Stevie Ray!” Chad cried, “Stop! Stop it!”

The dog backed off long enough for the man to crawl a few feet but never stopped growling and circling his flanks. The man whimpered in pain.

“You’d better leash your dog,” the father told Chad, then asked, “do you know that man?”

Chad shook his head as he slowly approached the angry Rottweiler.

“Stevie Ray, Stevie Ray, good boy, calm down now....”

The dog let Chad grab the leash but wouldn’t budge when the boy tried to tug him away from the stranger who was bleeding on the grass.

The father came to the side of the stranger and knelt. The stranger was dressed in black, he even had a ski mask rolled up as a cap on his head. The father noticed a black gym bag hooked around the stranger’s arm and grew suspicious. He pulled the bag away, unzipped it, and dumped the contents out on the sidewalk, sifting through them with his large hands.

The father started breathing heavily, stooped over the scattered debris from the bag, then stood up fast and ran back to his house. Chad kept trying to pull Stevie Ray away, but the dog was relentless, insisting on staying within striking distance of the strange man.

“Oh, Stevie Ray,” Chad begged, “please boy, come on, let’s go.” Exasperated, he looked up and saw the girl using the phone, no doubt calling the police. He had a sickening feeling that Stevie Ray was in bad trouble. Don’t they kill dogs who attack people? Chad risked touching his beloved new dog on the haunch, hoping to draw his attention away from the stranger, but Stevie Ray only growled louder, letting Chad know this wasn’t a game.

Shortly, the front door of the house slammed open, and the father stormed across the street, eyes wild with anger. Chad saw the gun in his hand and fell to the ground next to Stevie Ray, holding his hands up, ready to plead for his dog’s life. But before he could say anything, the father started shooting the stranger. The thunderously loud explosions caused Chad and Stevie Ray to recoil instinctively, rolling away from the stranger’s body. Chad clung to the dog, burying his head in the warm fur Stevie Ray’s chest. He cried out, certain that the next sound he’d hear would be his last, wincing at the thought of a bullet ripping through his back, exploding out his chest, probably killing Stevie Ray too.

When the ringing in his ears died down, Chad lifted his face and Stevie Ray took a cheap shot, licking him from chin to forehead with a massive, slimy tongue. Chad hugged the dog again, sobbing with relief.

Chad stood up on wobbly legs and turned around. The father was looming over what was left of the stranger, holding a smoking gun. He looked at Chad and Stevie Ray then nodded and started walking slowly back to his house. Sirens wailed, growing nearer.

Chad staggered to the sidewalk and knelt to inspect the stuff that the father had dumped out of the stranger's bag, wondering what had set him off. At first nothing made sense, then he started putting pieces together; a knife, binoculars, a bottle of pills, a pornographic magazine, plastic gloves, a pair of white panties... a box of condoms....

Even though the night air was bordering on cold, Chad suddenly felt very hot. He looked around and saw neighbors joining together in small groups, talking and pointing at the father who was crossing the street with a big gun in his hand. On an impulse, Chad slid the knife from its sheath and surreptitiously tossed it, so it landed next to the mutilated body that had been the pervert stalker.

Chad stood up as the flashing red and blue lights of police cruisers turned the Esplanade into a carnival.

When the police searched David Cotton's apartment, they found plenty of incriminating evidence to suggest that he had raped before, most of it in the form of trophies such as panties, pictures, or hair clippings. Add to that Chad Redding's testimony that David Cotton had tried to kill him with a buck knife, and it was easy for the court to find John Rodgers' multiple shooting of David Cotton on the night of October 27th a justifiable, if not excessive, act of self-defense.

Chad's father called the breeder and verified that, just because Stevie Ray had tasted human blood, he wasn't going to become a vicious killer. That was strictly a myth. But the breeder did suggest that they try not to make a habit of it, saying "you never know what kinds of diseases people carry."

Hearing that, Chad's mom let Stevie Ray sleep in the house again.

“Taking Stevie Ray for a walk?” Chad’s father asked as Chad grabbed the leash from the coat rack and opened the back door. It was 8:30 at night and Dad was dressed for work, sipping coffee and reading a magazine at the breakfast table.

“No,” Chad said, “I was thinking of going to the opera.” He held the leash up to his neck, letting it dangle down his chest. “Does this tie match my shirt?”

Dad looked around, making sure his wife wasn’t watching, then gave his son the finger. Chad snickered as he leapt out the back door, screen slamming behind him.

Stevie Ray double-timed it to the first streetlamp, did his business, then turned right and headed for the river. Chad talked to his dog as they walked, explaining the human world to the feral beast who had become a polite, if not responsive, listener. As they approached the familiar two-story house overlooking the river, the dog pumped his powerful legs faster, pulling Chad behind him.

Stevie Ray let out a happy barking sound, “roof!”, and got a response from the back yard of the house they were approaching. As they turned into the driveway, another Rottweiler came charging around the corner, barking at Stevie Ray. The two dogs wagged their stubs and greeted each other with Eskimo kisses.

The dog’s name was Angel, and she was Stevie Ray’s sister.

Amy came around the house moments later, holding a leash in her hand.

John Rodgers stood in the doorway and sipped his coffee. He was also dressed for work, waiting a few more minutes before swinging by the Redding’s house to pick up Chad’s father for the ride into Lansing. It was Mr. Redding who gave him the number of the Rottweiler breeder who sold them Stevie Ray. When the breeder heard the story about how John’s daughter had been saved by one of his Rottweilers, he was going to give them a dog for free, but John insisted on paying. He had the money and couldn’t think of a better way to spend it, not even on the twenty-five-dollar bottles of whiskey he used to buy twice a week, or the countless wads of fives and tens that had gone to beer almost every day.

John watched his daughter walk down the street with the two dogs and the boy who lied under oath for him. He wasn’t worried about her at all, and that was the best feeling in the world.